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## The parenting role of African American fathers in the context of urban poverty

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines low-income African American fathers' perceptions of their parenting role and the strategies they employ to bring up children in poor urban neighborhoods. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with 36 fathers who had contact with their children at least twice a month. Men in the study expressed conventional views of their fathering roles as provider, nurturer, and teacher, but placed the most emphasis on "being there" for their children, as their financial circumstances limited other forms of involvement. Many fathers felt their circumstances to be exacerbated by a hostile child-support system. They desired to teach their children alternatives to the negative practices and values they saw in their urban neighborhoods and to have the skills to prosper in mainstream society. Overall, the findings suggest that many low-income urban fathers already desire to be responsible fathers but see themselves as limited by material and structural challenges. Services and policies that promote the economic stability of low-income fathers are recommended.

### Keywords

fathers; poverty; urban neighborhoods; parenting; qualitative study

### Introduction

The role of fathering in low-income families has become an increasingly prominent theme in the literature due to the well-established relationship between fathers' involvement in their children's lives and improved child outcomes. Research has demonstrated that when low-income fathers are consistently present, their children experience associated gains in cognitive and language development, and academic achievement; and they manifest fewer problem behaviors (Black and Dubowitz 1999; Coley 2001; Jackson, Jeong-Kyun, and Franke 2009). To promote positive father involvement, therefore, is to promote children's well-being. Policy makers have responded with initiatives to support responsible fatherhood and marriage, while other legislation has helped ensure that fathers meet their financial responsibilities toward their children. Meanwhile, a popular societal perception has risen of the deadbeat dad who knowingly shirks his responsibilities toward his children. Often missing from this debate are the voices of low-income fathers themselves, what they perceive their role to be, and the barriers they experience in fulfilling it.

Understanding the perspectives of low-income fathers is of particular importance in the African American community. Almost two-thirds of African American children do not live

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with their biological father, compared to just over one-third of Hispanic children, and less than one-third of white children (US Census Bureau 2011a). African American fathers are also more likely to face additional barriers in their parenting role due to poverty and the environment in which they live. More than twice as many black children (39%) grow up in families living below the poverty level than do white children (18%) (US Census Bureau 2011b). Black children are also more likely to live in a neighborhood where a greater proportion of other children are poor (Drake and Rank 2009). A lack of household resources is thereby likely compounded by a lack of community resources.

Despite the challenges outlined above, many African American men do play an active role in their children's lives, even if they do not live in the same household with them (Smith et al. 2005). The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of African American men, whether resident or nonresident, who have maintained frequent contact with their children. We examined how African American men construct their roles as fathers and the parenting strategies they employ, in the context of urban poverty.

## Background

### Parenting in poverty

A substantial amount of research has shown poverty to be at the root of numerous negative outcomes for children (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997). Children who grow up in poverty are at higher risk for school failure and dropping out (Engle and Black 2008), for delayed or impaired cognitive functioning (Bradely and Corwyn 2002), and for socio-emotional and behavioral problems (Bradley and Corwyn 2002; Samaan 2000). Researchers interested in the causal mechanism between poverty and child outcomes have often turned to the role of parenting as a mediating influence. Poverty is generally associated in the literature with more negative parenting styles, specifically with parental harshness and reduced expression of affection and responsiveness to the child (Aber, Jones, and Cohen 2000; McLoyd 1990). Negative parent-child interactions are presumed to be caused in part by rising levels of stress due to financial strain (Middlemiss 2003).

In a study of low-income mothers and fathers involved in the Canadian child welfare system, Russell, Harris, and Gockel (2008) found that poverty was considered the single biggest barrier to effective parenting. Parents felt themselves to be "on the margins of defeat" due to the fear that their funds would run out (88). They blamed themselves for their inability to provide, and experienced varying degrees of depression and hopelessness, ascribed to their financial circumstances.

The impact that poverty has upon fathering is complicated by the ways in which the paternal role is constructed in society as a whole. Traditional models of fathering in which the primary paternal responsibility is to provide for the family have given way to more equitable models, where there is less delineation between what is expected of the mother and the father (Cabrera and Tamis-LeMonda 2000). A "good" father is now perceived to be nurturing and responsive to the emotional needs of his children as well as able to provide for their material needs. Low-income fathers, as they are popularly construed, are perceived as failing to live up to these ideals on both counts. Research with low-income fathers, however, shows that the roles of both provider and nurturer are perceived as important to these men (Summers et al. 2006). For example, Roy (2004) found that low-income and working-class men endorsed the responsibility of the father to provide financially for his children, but when this was not possible, looked to different forms of interaction with their children as an alternative measure of success.

In addition to the home and the neighborhood, fathers must fulfill their parenting role in the context of wider public policy requirements. Of particular relevance to nonresident fathers is the child support system. A basic premise of federal legislation concerned with the enforcement of child support is that many children live in poverty because their absent fathers fail to pay support, even though they can afford it (Harris 2011). Many observers have argued, however, that disadvantaged fathers fail to provide formal support, not because they are unwilling, but because their circumstances hinder them (Cancian, Meyer, and Han 2011). Prime among these circumstances are the limited and low-wage employment opportunities that men living in low-income neighborhoods are likely to face. Fathers' difficulties in meeting mandated payments are exacerbated by a system that is slow to respond to changes in their economic circumstances; indeed, many states allow huge arrears to build up during times of unemployment or incapacity (Ha, Cancian, and Meyer 2010).

### Parenting in low-income urban neighborhoods

Low-income African American fathers are further challenged by the stressors associated with living in low-income urban neighborhoods. Poverty is not evenly distributed in the United States; many children who grow up in low-income families also grow up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). Furthermore, African American families are much more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty than are white families (Turner and Fenderson 2006). The stressors of concentrated poverty are not only economic: low-income urban communities are also characterized by high levels of violent crime, racial segregation, and limited employment opportunities (Wilson 1987).

Parenting has been seen to play an important role in the transmission of neighborhood effects to child outcomes (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). First, parents who live in low-income neighborhoods are less likely to have access to quality, affordable institutional resources to help in their parenting task. In neighborhoods where resources such as child care, quality schools, or other youth-focused organizations are not easily accessible, low-income parents may feel that they have no safe place for their children to spend time outside of the home (Jarrett 1997).

Second, parenting behaviors are associated with the neighborhood of residence (Kohen et al. 2008); for example, parents who live in poorer neighborhoods have been shown to demonstrate less warmth (Tendulkar et al. 2010). Third, disadvantaged neighborhoods have been associated with reduced levels of collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Low-income residents are less likely to be socially connected to one other, or to band together to promote positive social norms (Ceballo and McLoyd 2002; Galster and Santiago 2006). A lack of social cohesion, in turn, can lead to increased parenting stress, especially for minority parents (Franco, Pottick, and Huang 2010). Finally, limited employment opportunities may also affect parents' ability to provide financially for their children. Poor African Americans are more geographically isolated from employment opportunities than any other population (Covington 2009). Clearly, the context in which fathers parent their children in these communities is arduous.

Parents facing the dual challenges of familial poverty and disadvantaged neighborhoods may employ various strategies to nullify the deleterious effects of their circumstances. In a review of qualitative studies, Jarrett (1997) identified four strategies that African American families in impoverished neighborhoods report using to create a safe and nurturing environment for their children, and give them the best possible chance of success. First, some families use protection strategies to manage their children's day-to-day lives, limiting contact with other residents. Second, parents may employ strategies to closely monitor their children. This means either attempting to isolate the children from negative peer or adult influences, or chaperoning them outside the home. Third, parents may seek out resources

available in their community on behalf of their children, and challenge agencies to provide what they need. Finally, they may provide in-home learning opportunities to supplement and reinforce materials offered in the schools.

These findings are supported by other research indicating that some parents actively seek out resources within and outside the community, to build their children's social capital (Furstenberg 2001, 2005).

Evidence of the particular parenting strategies that fathers employ in low-income neighborhoods is scarce. Letiecq and Koblinsky (2004) investigated the strategies that African American fathers use to keep their young children safe in violent neighborhoods. The themes that emerged from this study were similar to those described regarding parenting in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Fathers in the study constantly supervised their children and restricted them to their homes, trying to insulate them from neighborhood dangers; they educated their children about safety; and they sought to teach their children how to handle conflict. We know little, however, about how fathers seek to address broader issues of parenting in the context of concentrated poverty by, for instance, preparing their children for life beyond the urban neighborhood.

### **Cultural ecological perspective**

This paper employs a cultural ecological perspective to consider how African American fathers develop parenting strategies in response to urban poverty. Ecological approaches to human behavior take into account the cultural, environmental, and social systems in which we live (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The cultural ecological model was developed to explain the process by which different cultural groups pass on specific skills between generations (Ogbu 1981). The basis of the model is that different populations must master particular tasks in order to survive. Among minority groups, these skills are necessarily different from those of the dominant population due to the pressures of segregation and racism. Child-rearing techniques develop, therefore, as a means of ensuring that children have the instrumental skills they need to become competent adults in their own milieu. Urban African American parents may have the same ultimate goals for their children (financial security, health, happiness, and so on) as other parents, but, according to this model, will teach ways of achieving them that are appropriate to the urban neighborhood. Our purpose here, therefore, was to understand how the fathers in our study had shaped their paternal role and practices according to their low-income urban context.

### **Method**

This study was part of a larger mixed-methods project to develop and test a strategy to engage African American fathers in parenting programs. In this phase of the study, qualitative data were collected to ascertain fathers' perceptions and opinions about: (1) the role of men in parenting, and (2) parenting programs aimed at enhancing their child's emotional and behavioral development and preventing child maltreatment.

### **Recruitment and sample**

The study took place in a midwestern city notable for its high levels of racial and economic segregation. Neighborhoods in targeted areas were characterized by high levels of unemployment and crime, and, physically, by abandoned buildings and vacant lots. Flyers were distributed in high-poverty neighborhoods where the population was almost exclusively African American. Based on collaboration with a community partner whose work focuses on African American fathers, recruitment locations were identified that included barbershops, restaurants, retail stores, and social service agencies.

Men were admitted into the study if they self-identified as African American and were the father of at least one child between the ages of 4 and 12. This age range was determined by the developmental target of the intervention being tested in a later phase of the study. Fathers needed to provide some sort of stable care for their child, defined as visitation at least twice a month. Participants were also asked to share information about the project with their peers. We conducted five focus groups with 29 total participants. Twelve individual interviews were then conducted with randomly selected focus group participants. As new themes were still emerging after these interviews (i.e., saturation had not been reached), seven more fathers were recruited and interviewed. In all, 19 interviews were conducted, with a final total sample size of 36.

All participants in the study were African American men; their mean age was 37. Only 17% of the men were married or living with a partner; 33% were divorced or separated, and 50% were single. The majority (80%) had completed high school or received a GED. Over half of the men (57%) were unemployed.

## Procedure

Prior to the start of each focus group and interview, participants were informed of their rights as research participants, and informed consent was obtained. The focus groups were conducted by a facilitator trained by an expert in qualitative research methods; also present was a trained research assistant, who took notes during the focus groups. Each focus group was held at a community-based agency providing support services to fathers, and was audio-recorded. Data on age, education, employment status, housing situation, corrections involvement, and family structure were collected from the participants. Fathers received a \$25 gift card from Wal-Mart as remuneration for their focus group participation.

The interviews were conducted by trained interviewers and held at our community partner agency. Fathers received a \$15 gift card from Wal-Mart as remuneration for interview participation.

The focus group and interview guides were developed via an iterative process outlined by Krueger (1997a) and addressed the overall aims of this phase of the project. Specifically, the focus groups addressed topics relating to parenting programs and strategies for engaging African American men in fatherhood services. Individual interviewees were asked about their own perceptions of father-child relationships. While participants were not asked questions related to poverty or the urban environment, these issues clearly emerged as pervasive themes across the focus groups and the individual interviews, indicating their direct relevance to parenting for the men.

## Data analysis

The transcripts from the focus groups and from the individual interviews were analyzed separately using inductive thematic analysis (Krueger 1997b). Our racially diverse team read through the transcripts individually and then met to discuss the themes we saw emerging. From this, we developed preliminary codebooks—one for focus groups and one for the interviews. As we read further transcripts, we compared the existing codebooks to the emerging themes and revised them where necessary. This process was repeated until the codebooks best representing the themes of the transcripts were identified. Team members, working individually or in pairs, then coded the transcripts using NVivo 8. Coding summaries were examined by multiple team members for evaluation and in order to reduce bias. Conceptual cluster matrices were then created containing phrases and quotations from the interviews and focus groups, in order to assess the frequency and consistency of themes across the participants and groups.

## Findings

Six themes emerged from our analysis. The first three—*Providing and Nurturing in Poverty*, *The Psychological Burden of Poverty*, and *The Burden of Child Support*—document the fathers' views of how their individual financial circumstances shape their paternal roles. The next three themes—*A Different Environment*, *Teaching and Role Modeling*, and *Beyond the Neighborhood*—describe the fathers' perceptions of parenting in a high-poverty urban neighborhood.

### Providing and nurturing in poverty

The majority of fathers saw providing for their children as an essential, even fundamental, component of their paternal role. They conceptualized this partly in terms of meeting the substantive needs of their children: providing a roof over their heads, food to eat, and clothing and shoes. Being a “provider,” in their minds, however, was not limited to ensuring their children had sufficient material goods. In fact, they believed that to stop there would be to fail in the parenting role. The fathers also saw their children as having less tangible needs, such as for emotional support and education, which they saw as their responsibility to provide. When one nonresident father was asked about his primary parenting responsibility, he responded:

I would say to take care of the household, but at the same time, the welfare of my kids, period, on any level: mental, emotional, physical, all of that.... That's automatic—food, and the bills and stuff like—that's automatic... you can't even count that. That doesn't count as parenting responsibility.... To me...you s'posed to be involved. That's the main one, involved.

While taking care of the child's physical needs was expected, many fathers reported a need to provide a physical presence, regardless of any obstacles they personally faced.

Poverty, however, limited the ways in which these fathers could be involved with their children. For some nonresident fathers, their lack of financial resources literally meant that they could not see some of their children who lived in a different city or state. For others, not having sufficient funds meant that they were unable to take their children out to eat or to activities as often as they would like to. While the men regretted the activities they were not able to provide, several of them continued the theme of “being there” as the most important thing:

I mean, money is important. Don't get me wrong. But if you don't have it, then I think “the QT”... You know, quality time. It's just as important, if not more important, because that's what they seem to like. You know, you can't afford Disney World, but we can do a walk in the park.

The fathers looked for alternative and creative ways to spend time with their children. Most were aware of free museums and other activities available around the city. While they regretted not being able to provide more expensive experiences for their children, they affirmed their belief in the intrinsic relational value of less expensive activities.

### The psychological burden of poverty

The fathers described poverty as limiting more than the time and money they could expend on their children; poverty was also seen as a source of worry and diminished self-worth. One father observed, “Worry comes in with the bills. That takes away from the relationship because you are too busy focusing on that. So, you end up forgetting about the child.” More problems arose when conventional ideals about fatherhood were compared with the reality of parenting in poverty. The fathers were concerned about the impact their inability to



provide would have on the way that other people viewed them. One father spoke of his reluctance to ask other people for help when he couldn't afford to take his daughter out to eat, referring to his "foolish pride." For another man, the psychological burden of poverty impacted his identity even beyond his role as a father: "We some angry black men. What I mean by that, we dealing with the situation at hand, poverty. You know, not being able to be respected as a man." For him, the multiple burdens of poverty, dealing with the child support system, and racial stigmatization made him feel that others questioned his masculinity.

### **The burden of child support**

Of the reasons proffered for the financial situations the fathers found themselves in, by far the most prevalent was the burden of paying child support. Some men stated that they were constantly behind in their payments, and never felt that they had enough to pay what was expected. This was exacerbated by struggles to find sufficient employment. As one father commented:

I've put in a lot of applications, and the economy is what the economy is...I don't have any extra money. It all goes to child support. I probably got another maybe three or four months' left worth of money in the bank. So, I got to be going before that child support money runs out, because I'm already behind. They started me behind.

Fathers felt that child support payments took the bulk of their resources, meaning that they had little left over to pay for visits to see their children or to buy them gifts. The men expressed resentment at the amount of support being demanded, which when coupled with late payments, they said contributed to already antagonistic relationships with their children's mothers.

The anger of many of the fathers was, however, directed at the system itself and to some extent, at society in general. They noted the authority the system has to criminalize men unable to keep up with their payments and said they felt that women had the power in the system. They said women were allowed to say or do anything, and their demands were given more credence by the court. It is important to note that these same men consistently expressed a desire to provide for their children, and a minority expressed some degree of approval for child support as a concept. This particular group of men, in fact, was scornful of fathers whom they saw as not even trying to make payments; they considered such fathers' lack of effort a sign of not wanting to be fathers in the first place. One of the group even offered advice to men he believed to be shirking their duties:

You say you want to have a relationship with your child, but you at the club every night. Or you rolling dubs on '79 Cutlass, and your son needs shoes just to go to school .... Don't sit back and complain about the system when you're not even applying yourself.

Paying child support was viewed as part of the responsibility of fatherhood, along with being involved in their children's upbringing. While these men felt that their low-income circumstances meant they must be more realistic about what they could provide, they did not consider themselves "off the hook" entirely.

### **A different environment**

When it came to the environment in which these fathers were raising their children, they felt that their role was fundamentally different from that of a parent living in a more prosperous neighborhood. An urban neighborhood, as one father explained, is a "different environment." They were concerned about the negative experiences their children would be

exposed to, such as crime, drugs, fires, death, and gang violence. They also expressed concern about the lure of the streets. Not only might their children witness these things, they might become involved. As one father recounted of his son, “Every day he come home telling me, “There’s a new gang near us, there’s a gang over here...and it’s hard to keep him away from that.... It’s a constant struggle.”

The fathers were cognizant that their children, who are growing up in low-income urban neighborhoods, would not have the same social advantages other children might enjoy as a matter of course. Expressing this view, one father described how the disadvantages of familial and neighborhood poverty are compounded by the community’s perceived lack of knowledge about how to access resources and opportunities for their children:

And, I’m speaking from, let me just say, a ’hood perspective, because people that aren’t actually in the ’hood, they have more structure, common knowledge, and finances to put their kids in stuff, like piano, ballet, you understand what I’m saying? Different things of that nature. They have the transportation and funds to drive their kids to a different school, or have them play soccer, or whatever the case may be.

For this man, parents who are not raising their children in low-income urban neighborhoods not only have more financial resources that enable them to seek out the best cultural, recreational and educational experiences for their children, but they also have the necessary skills and knowledge to access these advantages.

### Teaching and role modeling

The fathers studied were concerned about teaching their children the skills they knew were needed to survive. Their sense was that their children would learn how to live from one of two places: their father or the streets. The fathers who spoke about this topic were determined to avoid the latter. To them, providing for their children included the transmission of knowledge relating to life in an urban neighborhood. One father even viewed this knowledge as being as important a part of his fathering role as the provision of food, shelter, and emotional support:

You have to provide, you know, information that will possibly help them to avoid certain situations that they should not become involved in, such as gangs, drugs, underage sex, disease, you know, being locked up.... I want to make sure that my kids stay free from those types of things. You know, the temptations of the streets or peer pressure that might be pressed upon them.

Like many of the participants, the father quoted above had a list of negative activities associated with the streets he believed his children needed to be educated about. The concern with activities their children should avoid also extended to the values they wanted them to hold. The task of educating a child was seen as moral as well as informational. One father was concerned, for instance, that if his son learned to adhere to the values his peers had, he would end up either as a victim of crime, or as someone engaging in crime himself. For example, he did not want his son to copy his peers in being obsessed with having the latest brands; this father feared that his son would then feel the need to “turn to the corners to try to make something happen or go out there and catch somebody at an ATM.”

In order to prevent their children, particularly their sons, from being drawn into life on the streets, the fathers expressed the need to present alternative role models. One father reflected on the positive example in this respect that his stepfather had given him:

It was good to know that I didn’t have to look to some dude on the street to be my mentor, as far as a male role model...we had a lot of one-on-one time, as far as,



you know, being responsible, not hanging out with the wrong crowd. Things like that. Because in our community, as we all know, any day we can turn on the television or pick up a paper and the numbers are just scary. Yeah, he kept me on the right track.

While many of these fathers could not physically insulate their children from negative influences, they could provide an alternative by being positive role models themselves. In line with this aspiration, some of the fathers sought to project a nurturing paternal identity as a means of protecting their children from the streets, in contrast to the more traditional authoritative identity. One interviewee explained, “Nowadays you have to let your kids know that you love them.... if you don’t tell them, then those thugs out in the street that he’s trying to avoid is going to tell him what he wants to hear.”

### **Beyond the neighborhood**

Along with educating their children in the skills necessary to survive in an urban neighborhood, the fathers interviewed wanted their children to have the tools to eventually escape that negative environment. For some this meant teaching their children to be able to “go out and make [their] own money.” This was seen as a means of giving their children the knowledge and skills necessary to eventually leave the neighborhood, to break free from the cycle of poverty. The fathers felt they must educate their children in this way because the world would treat them differently from other children because of the color of their skin and the socioeconomic circumstances they were born into.

The fathers wanted their children to understand that they must fight to survive in a world where they are the underdog. One father spoke of instructing his daughter by saying, “Know that you must work. Know that nothing is ever going to be given to you. As bad as it might sound, the world don’t give a dag about your ups and downs. The world ain’t got time for sorrow.”

For others it was more a case of their children being able to navigate not only their own kind of neighborhood, but also other kinds of environments. One father was explicitly concerned that his child learn skills relevant to their own neighborhood as well as skills needed to prosper in other environments:

It’s not just my neighborhood. It is any and all neighborhoods. You have to look at it 360. Not just at your level. You know, you got to go in the city as well as come out [to the suburbs]. And you got to see how people interact with each other. Because whatever you grow up around don’t necessarily mean that the next person is going to grow up like that. You know, or it doesn’t mean that it is going to be accepted. What you do in your upbringing or neighborhood is not going to work. You have to learn how to adapt and be diverse.

This father reflected the views of many participants, wanting more for their children than they themselves had. Part of this goal required preparing for life beyond the borders of the urban neighborhood.

### **Discussion**

The popular depiction of low-income African American fathers as deadbeat dads paints them as rejecting conventional views of fatherhood and its attendant responsibilities. Our interviews with men who retained some degree of contact with their children, however, revealed a strikingly different picture. These fathers agreed that they were responsible for the well-being of their children and did not cede that responsibility either to the mothers or to the state—regardless of their economic circumstances. They had high hopes for their

children's futures, dreaming of a life that was better than their own. They also expressed frustration and anger at the limitations placed on them by their socioeconomic circumstances and the environments in which they live.

This complex mix of conventional ideals with the conviction that their own circumstances set them apart from the mainstream was evident in all of the themes that emerged.

Like most fathers, the men in our study believed that part of their paternal responsibility was to provide materially for their children (Olmstead, Futris, and Pasley 2009). Their ability to fulfill this conventional role, however, was impeded by both their individual circumstances and, for many fathers, the demands placed on them by the child support system. Without work that yields a living wage, financial provision is impossible. Perhaps in an attempt to reconcile their adherence to the mainstream ideal of paternal provision, many of the fathers reinterpreted the substance of that provision as "being there" or providing emotional support.

Although these are aspects of the paternal role that accord with conventional ideas of fathers as nurturers, it was notable that the men we interviewed had consciously fit them into the template of a father as provider. Just as it is not enough to meet a child's material needs without addressing his or her emotional needs, neither is it acceptable to nurture without providing, whatever form that provision might take.

When, for these men, the child support system became a factor in defining the way in which they must provide for their children, fulfilling the provider role was no longer a voluntary activity, but instead a legal requirement. Fathers who support their children in this indirect way have no control over what their money pays for, as demonstrated by the father who complained that he could not choose gifts for his children because he had so little money left over once child support had been taken out.

All too often, the policy and research conversation about the child support system has focused on ways of enforcing the payments owed by low-income men. But the voices of the low-income men themselves rarely have made it into the discussion. The fathers' opinions that the demands of the system are often unreasonably burdensome and punitive are an important counterpoint, especially when heard alongside their statements about the importance of providing for their children, and even support for the system as a concept. Of particular note was the fact that their voices backed up previous research showing that the enforcement of formal child support payments is likely to reduce overall paternal financial provision. That is because enforcement cuts off previous informal arrangements such as the provision of material goods (Harris 2011).

Our fathers were also conventional in their ambition to be their children's teachers. Yet the topics they felt they must cover with their children set them apart. Issues that might be peripheral and unrealized fears in middle-class neighborhoods were all too real in the neighborhoods these fathers and their children live in. Perhaps because many of the men did not live with their children, they did not emphasize monitoring as a way of protecting their children from the dangers of the urban neighborhood, in the same way parents in the previous literature did. Although the nonresident fathers could not always know where their children were or protect them physically at all times, they could teach them what dangers to avoid.

By not insulating their children from the realities of urban life, the fathers were preemptively guarding them from a rival kind of knowledge that normalized or even glamorized life on the streets. This specialized knowledge that urban fathers share with their children may be seen as a type of currency. Fathers who are not able to lift their children out of poverty with

literal dollars may instead be able to provide the tools of survival and even escape through the competencies and ideals they teach.

The emphasis that the fathers in our study placed on giving their children tools to promote their social mobility reflected not only their desire that the next generation not be stuck in the same poverty they are, but also their belief that such a life is possible. Like most Americans, they desired that their children have a better and more prosperous life than their own. The neighborhood to them was not an inescapable trap. With this in mind, the instrumental skills they were passing on had been formed not only by their own culture and environment, but by the mainstream ideologies of the majority culture. They taught their children the skills to survive in their neighborhoods—for example, resisting the lure of gangs—but also encouraged conventional means of success: staying in school and working hard.

While one set of rules works for the low-income neighborhood, a different set is needed to be successful outside of the neighborhood. Unlike wealthier majority children, low-income African American children must be able to operate in two spheres. The fathers, therefore, sought to teach not only skills that would be advantageous in their own minority culture, but those that would lead to success in the majority culture. The fathers had no illusions about how challenging this would be. They recognized the lack of cultural capital in their neighborhoods and believed that the world would prove to be a harsh place for their children. Their response, however, was not one of fatalism. Instead, they wanted to teach their children to work hard, no matter the inequalities they knew they would face.

## Limitations

This study was concerned with the perceptions and opinions of fathers involved, albeit sometimes in a limited fashion, in the lives of their children in one midwestern city. The findings cannot be assumed to be representative of fathers living in low-income urban neighborhoods who do not have regular contact with their children or live in other geographic areas. The men also self-selected into the study. It is possible that this indicated a greater identification with the fathering role, and a desire to parent effectively. While we recognize that our study participants are not representative of all African American fathers, the findings presented here provide further evidence of how their involvement in their children's lives might be best promoted through both policy and practice.

## Practice and policy recommendations

This study has several implications for practitioners working with low-income fathers and for policy makers. First, the finding that these urban African American fathers had fairly conventional views of the paternal role, yet felt that structural barriers prevented them from fulfilling it, suggests a need to respond in a way that looks beyond traditional parenting interventions or punitive policies. There are undeniably fathers from all social classes and neighborhoods who have no involvement with their children and do not desire to do so. However, for fathers who have persisted in being in their children's lives despite the financial and environmental challenges they face, the task ahead is not so much to teach the importance of father involvement as to provide the resources that make it possible. This conclusion has implications for the ways in which programs targeting the improvement of parenting skills for urban fathers are delivered, for the types of services that concerned agencies offer, and for national policy, particularly policy related to noncustodial fathers.

Agencies targeting low-income urban fathers must design their curricula with the particular strengths in mind that these parents possess, as well as the barriers they face. Low-income fathers are likely to possess specialized knowledge about the competencies they need, to live

in an urban neighborhood, and these should be acknowledged, alongside the other parenting skills mainstream culture values. Some of these skills are realistic coping strategies for living in poor, and sometimes violent, neighborhoods. So, interventions with low-income fathers should not sweep aside discussions of barriers to effective parenting specific to urban neighborhoods, but should instead discuss teaching children how to, for example, avoid dangerous situations or resist the pull to join a gang.

Organizations seeking to teach low-income fathers effective parenting skills should view traditional curriculums in this category as only one available tool. Such programs may seek to build on individual skills and strengths, but cannot shift the structural barriers attendant with living with poverty in an area of concentrated disadvantage. For this reason, interventions should be provided alongside other services that enable low-income fathers to provide materially for their children. Programs that prepare men to enter and succeed in the labor market might be provided alongside more general educational programs, such as GED classes.

In providing access to educational and labor opportunities, community agencies are also in the position to expand fathers' human and social capital, thereby increasing the likelihood that their children will be socially mobile. These agencies are in a prime position to address the powerlessness felt in the face of structural barriers. For example, they might be helpful by providing information about the child support system, addressing common misperceptions, and enabling fathers to navigate the system.

These organizations' ability to provide such holistic services has been enhanced by federally funded Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grants. These grants are designated to encourage responsible fatherhood, for example, by funding activities that foster economic stability. Such initiatives help men maximize their potential within the system as it stands. Although research is limited about the effectiveness of Responsible Fatherhood programs that target disadvantaged nonresident men, indications are that multicomponent programs that include a focus on employment and child support have positive outcomes, including increased father involvement, particularly among men who face the most barriers to financial stability (Knox et al. 2011).

Other systemic policy changes might raise noncustodial fathers' ability to provide materially for their children. For example, a crucial arena for reform identified in this study is the child support system. First, this system must become more responsive to the fluctuating income of noncustodial parents by calculating payments on the basis of actual present earnings. Fathers who work at a reduced wage or who have lost their jobs should not accrue high arrears while they search for further work. Second, men in this position might be encouraged and assisted to find work through the provision of job placement services, employment preparation, and transitional jobs. Low-income fathers must be able to bring home a living wage to support their children. Without additional supports in place, the current system places unreasonable expectations on some members of a group who have been disadvantaged by social, racial, and economic segregation.

The fathers participating in our study expressed a complex picture of what it means to parent in a low-income urban neighborhood. Their actions to nurture, teach, and financially provide for their children take place in an environment that provides few resources and many challenges, within a system perceived as hostile to their needs. At the same time, they described themselves as feeling denigrated by a mainstream society whose principal values they adhered to.

Interventions and policies that have placed the blame for father noninvolvement squarely at the feet of the men themselves have either ignored or misinterpreted the desires of low-

income men, such as those in our study, who want to maintain a relationship with their child. Until these men are enabled to provide a financially stable and safe environment for their children, their ability to fulfill their desired role will be severely limited.

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